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*Publication date:*  
2013

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Therkelsen, A. (2013). *The meaning of food on self-catering holidays*. Abstract from Nordic Symposium of Tourism and Hospitality Research, Bodø, Norway.

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# **The meaning of food on self-catering holidays**

## **A qualitative study of empty nesters and families with children**

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**Keywords:** food experiences, authenticity, self-catering holidays, empty nesters, families with children

### **Abstract**

Food as a determining factor for choice of holiday destination and a central experience during the holiday have been recurring arguments in debates among academics as well as practitioners within recent years. The study of food consumption in tourism is, however, still at an early stage, and hence we know relatively little about the meanings and practices related to food consumption on holidays. Moreover, the self-catering aspects of tourism-related food consumption have not been given much attention, just as the combination of self-catering and dining is left under-researched.

The purpose of this study is hence to establish the meaning of and practices in relation to food for different consumer groups on self-catering holidays and on this basis contribute with new qualitative knowledge on tourists' food relations useful for scholars and practitioners alike.

A predominant tenet in the existing studies is that tourists are characterized by a search for unknown or well-known food, which is a reflection of their personality as either extrovert and

adventurous or introvert and timid. Possession of or lack of local cultural capital is another explanatory framework used for understanding the search for unknown or well-known food on holidays. In view of general consumer theory, it is, however, pertinent to ask whether the dichotomous pairs of unknown/well-known, extrovert / introvert, plus / minus local cultural capital should be supplemented by additional concepts which acknowledge the volatile and fickle nature of postmodern consumers. A few tourism studies have adopted this approach and demonstrate that tourists' food relations are dynamic and may change across and within the same holiday and this is the approach to tourists' food relations adhered to here.

Qualitative interviews with Norwegian mature couples (i.e. empty nesters) and Danish families with children (i.e. full nesters) on of self-catering holidays in rented holiday houses constitute the empirical data of the study. This enables a discussion of the meaning of food for different consumer groups on self-catering holidays.

The analysis demonstrates that food has an experiential potential for both consumer groups on self-catering holidays in Denmark, though food is not a reason to go but rather a supplementary experience to the more central nature oriented experiences. A model is developed with summarizes four food-related experience types: food as enjoyment, food as cultural insight, food as togetherness and food as health, of which the former two are primarily, but not exclusively, identified among Norwegian empty nesters and the latter two among Danish families with children. The main contribution to the scholarly debate is hence that food experiences should be viewed as multi-faceted, i.e. they entail hedonistic qualities based on the sense stimulation that they provide, serve as a means to cultural insight of the place visited, provide the context for social bonding among family and friends, and/or are a means towards healthy living.